

PEASANT
LEADER

BACKWARD
CASTE
LEADER

ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT
IDEAS

MULTI-LEVEL
POLITICIAN

part of Jacksonian figure

issue to

dur

f the Sino-

at he had to

he

e land

ountry

e land tax

province of

nning and

the future

lways, as a

prosperous

tors

the

the urban

trial

try

. B. Gupta

the

a

hat

industrial

PROJECT SUMMARY

The proposal is for two interrelated projects: 1) a 20-year return resurvey of structures of local power in Meerut district of western Uttar Pradesh (U.P.), India and 2) a political biography of Meerut district's most famous political leader, Charan Singh, former prime minister of India.

The resurvey of Meerut district will focus on the following questions and issues: 1) changes in the power of previously dominant rural communities; 2) effects on rural inequalities of the differential impact of the Green Revolution on rural classes and castes; 3) changes in the status, political influence, and economic well-being of the Scheduled Castes, the poor, and the landless; 4) the political influence of non-agrarian social forces in the countryside, particularly students, the educated unemployed, and government employees.

The political biography of Charan Singh will focus on four aspects of his life and political career: 1) his rise from a district and state political leader to chief minister of U.P. and prime minister of India, 2) his role as spokesman for the middle peasantry of India; 3) his identification with the aspirations of the "backward castes" of intermediate social status and economic influence; and 4) his economic ideas for an alternative development strategy for India.

PROPOSAL FOR A SHORT-TERM RESEARCH FIELD TRIP TO CARRY OUT TWO INTERRELATED PROJECTS: 1) A STUDY OF STRUCTURES OF LOCAL POWER IN MEERUT DISTRICT AND 2) A POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY OF CHARAN SINGH, EX-PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA, ORIGINALLY FROM MEERUT DISTRICT

I propose to carry out two interrelated projects, each of which can be handled in a relatively short period of time in the Winter, 1981-82. The first project is discussed only briefly in this main statement. For the details of the research design and methodology of the first part of this proposal, please see Appendix A.

1. A Study of Structures of Local Power in Meerut District

I have submitted an application to the American Institute of Indian Studies and to Fulbright, a copy of which is enclosed, for a grant for 1982-83 to do a 20-year return restudy of the five districts in which I did the field work for my Ph.D. dissertation that led also to the publication of my Factional Politics in an Indian State: The Congress Party in Uttar Pradesh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965). In December, 1979, I revisited most of the districts very briefly for the first time in seventeen years while carrying out the research for an article on the 1977 and 1980 elections that was funded by the Smithsonian Institution.¹ ~~(A copy of that article is enclosed.)~~ It was during those visits that I began seriously to think that the changes which had taken place in the intervening years were sufficient to make the time ripe for a restudy.

One of the districts in which I did the original field work was Meerut, an important rural district near Delhi that is also the original home of Charan Singh, the last prime minister of India before Mrs. Gandhi returned to power. Aside from the fact that he was prime minister of India, Charan Singh is an extremely interesting figure for many other reasons which are given in the second part of this statement.

What I propose to do is to combine a resurvey of Meerut district with research for a political biography of Charan Singh in the Winter, 1982. If I could do both of these projects in the Winter, 1982, that would also make it possible for me to use my time in India in 1982-83 much more efficiently. The kind of work I would be doing in the resurvey of Meerut district is described in the enclosed project statement. I would like to mention also in this connection that I plan to follow up on the election research that I did for the article in December, 1979 by getting hold of the election results by polling station for Meerut district, which are available again for the first time in fifteen years.

I will need one month to carry out the interviews in Meerut and collect the election results.

2. Political Biography of Charan Singh

My interest in and personal contact with Charan Singh goes back twenty years to the time I did the original field work in Meerut district. At that time, Charan Singh was the predominant leader in the politics of the district. He was also one of the three most important factional leaders in the provincial Congress organization and a minister in the state government. I have followed his political career since then and have interviewed him on numerous occasions in the intervening years.

Four aspects of Charan Singh's life and political career seem to me to be especially important. First is the fact that his political life has involved him at all levels of the Indian political system. Second, he has become identified as the principal spokesman of the middle peasantry of India. Third, he has been identified also with the aspirations of the so-called backward castes of intermediate social status between the elite castes and the lower castes. Fourth, he has written a number of books, as well as political pamphlets, that present an extremely sophisticated and coherent alternative development strategy for India entirely different from that of former Prime Minister Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi. I give below some details on each of these four aspects of Charan Singh's political life and economic ideas which have led me to feel that it is valuable to write his political biography.

Charan Singh has been a politician with rural roots in an agricultural district, with a firm base also in his own Jat community, the leading agricultural caste of western U.P., Punjab, Haryana, and parts of Rajasthan. He has maintained his local political ties throughout his career while rising from district-level politics to the prime ministership of India. During his early political career, he established himself as a master of local, factional, and caste politics. Between 1952 and 1967, he was also one of the three principal leaders in Congress state politics. On April 1, 1967, he defected from the Congress to join with the opposition and then became the first non-Congress chief minister of the critical state of U.P. He was one of the principal leaders in the politics of the period from 1967 to 1971, when non-Congress governments were in power, having himself inaugurated this period by his defection. In 1977, Charan Singh and his political following comprised the principal electoral force in the coalition that defeated Mrs. Gandhi and the Congress in the famous elections of that year. In July, 1979, his followers precipitated a split in the Janata government that placed Charan Singh in power briefly as prime minister of India. In the 1980 elections, Charan Singh's party emerged as the largest non-Congress party and he became leader of the opposition in parliament. In the course of his political career, clearly, Charan Singh has played a central role in several of the most crucial turning points in the history of the politics of India's largest state and that of the country as a whole. A study of Charan Singh's political life, therefore, will also be, inevitably, a study of major turning points in Indian political history.

In addition to his role as a precipitator or central force in crisis periods in Indian politics, Charan Singh's participation in politics and his roles in these crises are of particular interest also for three other reasons. First, he has demonstrated a mastery of the multiple "idioms" of Indian politics:² the "traditional" idiom of caste and faction; the "modern" idiom of party, parliamentary behavior, and economic development planning; and the "saintly" idiom of the crusader against corruption in Indian public life. Second, Charan Singh has been both a politically ambitious man and a man with clear policy proposals. His political life, therefore, raises the issue of how one successfully pursues both power and policy in a rough-and-tumble representative political system. Finally, his political skill and his mastery of the modern idiom of parliamentary politics have been such that he has precipitated several constitutional debates and crises both in U.P. and at the central government level on such issues as the collective responsibility of the cabinet and appropriate procedures for forming and dismissing governments.

The second noteworthy aspect of Charan Singh's political career has been his role as spokesman for the middle peasantry. Throughout his active political life, he has been identified with rural, peasant interests and values in a political tradition in India that draws its inspiration from Gandhi and from Sardar Patel, Nehru's principal rival for political power in the country in the early years after Independence. Among Charan Singh's major contributions to the promotion and defense of the interests of the peasantry have been the following. He was the principal architect of the U.P. Zamindari Abolition Act, the most important piece of land reform enacted in this Indian state after Independence and the most carefully-conceived of the acts of that type enacted by the various state governments in India. Repeatedly, on issues of taxation and resource allocation, Charan Singh has stood forth as a spokesman for rural over urban interests and for agricultural development as opposed to large-scale industrial development. He has also opposed consistently the expansion of the state bureaucracy and the corruption associated with it, which he also has seen as, among other things, an unnecessary drain on rural resources and of little benefit to rural interests. In 1959, when the Indian National Congress adopted a resolution in favor of the introduction of joint, cooperative farming, Charan Singh opposed the policy. He argued that those people who favored such a policy, including Nehru, were misguided reformers who had no genuine understanding of village life. He proposed, instead of joint cultivation, policies that would strengthen the existing system of peasant proprietorship and that would sustain "rural democracy" rather than cooperative farming, which he thought could be maintained only by undemocratic means. Finally, in 1969, after his earlier defection from the Congress, Charan Singh founded the most successful agrarian party in modern Indian politics, the Bharatiya Kranti Dal (BKD), which later also became the central core of the opposition to Mrs. Gandhi and her Emergency rule and of the Janata Party that replaced the Congress in power in the Government of India from 1977 to 1980.

Although Charan Singh and his political following have often been accused of promoting the interests of a kulak class, his electoral support has, in fact, come from a broad range of landowning castes, including many small peasants. Moreover, despite the attempt, notably by the leaders of the Communist Party in India, to dismiss his ideas as mere kulakism, Charan Singh has formed successful political alliances with politicians from other Left political parties.

The third central aspect of Charan Singh's political career has been his identification with the interests of the so-called "backward castes." The rise of backward caste movements in opposition to the political and economic dominance of elite castes in Indian politics has been a recurring political phenomenon in several Indian states. In Tamil Nadu and in some other areas of the Deccan and south India, these movements have had a long history. In north India, however, they are relatively more recent in origin and have achieved less dramatic results than in Tamil Nadu, where Brahman predominance in public life was long ago substantially reduced. However, the social configuration of elite, backward, and low caste groups is more complicated and potentially more conflictual in north India than in Tamil Nadu for, in north India, unlike in the south, the elite castes continue to be the dominant political and economic forces in the countryside and are also numerically larger than most backward castes. Moreover, since many of the backward castes are rural peasants with holdings large enough to employ low caste laborers and since their political demands for increased representation in public services and in educational institutions are similar to the demands made on behalf of low caste groups, backward castes and low caste groups are often in conflict with each other.

In his political life, Charan Singh has faced a political dilemma in relation to his identification with the backward castes, which is that his support for their aspirations has been critical in his own advancement, but that it has also sometimes stood in the way of his formation of viable coalitions with elite and low caste groups. This kind of political dilemma is a common one for politicians in India's highly fragmented society where identification with the interests of one group is often interpreted as opposition to the interests of other groups. In the face of this dilemma, Charan Singh has succeeded in building a broad base of support among several of the most important middle cultivating castes in north India. He has also worked skillfully at both the local, electoral level and in state and national politics to form alliances with other castes and community groups. Although he has sometimes been successful in forming such alliances, his solid and persistent political support has always come predominantly from the backward castes. Thus, an analysis of Charan Singh's efforts to promote the interests of the backward castes of north India while seeking to build broader coalitions to achieve power at the state and national levels, is of general interest in understanding a characteristic kind of political dilemma in India's multiethnic political system.

The final aspect of Charan Singh's life that I wish to pursue is his role as an author of several highly original books on land reform, agriculture, and economic development in India that take a broad comparative perspective and are of theoretical interest as well to scholars of economic development. Charan Singh's most important book, India's Poverty and its Solution,³ was originally published in 1959 under the title, Joint Farming X-Rayed: The Problem and Its Solution in response to the Nagpur Resolution of the Indian National Congress, which proclaimed as one of the principal goals of the Congress the establishment of large-scale cooperative farms in India as a means of solving India's agricultural problems. Although the book takes off from the issue of cooperative farming and is an attack upon it, it is far more interesting as a positive statement and proposal for an economic development strategy for India based upon agricultural rather than industrial growth and as a defense of the system of

peasant proprietorship as the most suitable form of social organization to achieve both the economic goals of development and the political goals of democracy. It is also interesting, in some respects prescient, for its criticism of every form of large-scale mechanized farming as completely unsuited for Indian conditions. The book was published at the height of the Nehru-era emphasis on an economic development model based upon rapid industrialization, with agriculture seen primarily as a resource base for industrialization, providing food for the cities and revenue for plan projects. In this atmosphere, Charan Singh was seen as an obscurantist opponent of the modernization of India. Yet his book is surely one of the most remarkably erudite publications ever produced by a practising politician. Moreover, the arguments Charan Singh presented then anticipate the current economic critique of the rapid industrialization strategy, the recent emphasis on priority to agricultural development, and the world-wide concern with ecology and the avoidance of further destruction of man's environment.

Charan Singh's defense of peasant agriculture in India was based not only on economic and ecological grounds, but also on ideological and political grounds. In an agricultural society, he insisted, democracy was dependent upon the existence of small farms. Large farms, whether capitalist or collectivist, were inimical to democracy. Both types of big farms inevitably involve concentration of power and the direction of farm operations by a few, offering to the peasantry the prospect of a countryside "turned into huge barracks or gigantic agricultural factories."⁴ In contrast, peasants and peasant agriculture offer the greatest support for democracy for "where the worker himself is the owner of the land under his plough," the people will be independent in "outlook and action," conservative but not reactionary, non-exploitative, giving orders to none and taking orders from none. A "system of family-size farms" offers stability also "because the...peasant has a stake in his farm and would lose by instability."⁵

Charan Singh's book on Joint Farming was also a plea for the necessary priority to and capital investment in agriculture to bring about what ten years later would be called a "green revolution." Charan Singh thought, even before the development of the new wheat and rice varieties, that it was realistic to envision a doubling or tripling of India's food production by applying appropriate capital inputs. However, what distinguishes Charan Singh's proposals from those advanced through the international research institutes, the aid-giving agencies, and the government of India are their orientation toward the interests of the self-sufficient or potentially self-sufficient peasantry and their explicit emphasis on the economic, political, and even the moral values of a system of peasant agriculture. In a word, Charan Singh was insisting that technology and capital inputs must be applied to Indian agriculture not willy-nilly, but in a carefully controlled manner designed to sustain a particular socioeconomic order, political system, and way of life.

Although Charan Singh's economic ideas are complex and scholarly, he has not presented them for the edification of economists. Rather, they have been part and parcel of his political program. In fact, he has several times condensed them and presented them as the central sections of the manifestoes of the political parties he has led. As such, these manifestoes are by far the most sophisticated ever issued in India.⁶ They have demonstrated the seriousness of Charan Singh's attempts to present to the people of India an alternative economic program and to implement them if given the political power to do so.

In summary, I feel that an examination of Charan Singh's political life and economic ideas is really an entry-point into a much broader set of issues both for India and for the political and economic development of the remaining agrarian societies of the world. His political career raises the issue of whether or not a genuine agrarian movement can be built into a viable and persistent political force in the twentieth century in a developing country. His economic ideas and his political program raise the question of whether or not it is conceivable that a viable alternative strategy for the economic development of contemporary agrarian societies can be pursued in the face of the enormous pressures for industrialization. Finally, his specific proposals for the preservation and stabilization of a system of peasant proprietorship raise once again one of the major social issues of modern times, namely, whether an agrarian, economic order based upon small farms can be sustained against the competing pressures either for large-scale commercialization of agriculture or for some form of collectivization.

As indicated above, I have kept in contact with Charan Singh during the past twenty years. He has already given me his verbal agreement to do his political biography and to give me his recollections on tape the next time I come to India. Moreover, I already have a collection of materials and interviews that he gave me concerning his political life up to 1969. I have also a preliminary draft of a chapter concerning Charan Singh's career in U.P. politics based on those materials.

Charan Singh is now an old man, somewhat frail, with a heart condition. No time should be lost, therefore, in taking advantage of the opportunity he has offered me.

I expect to be able to gather the basic information that I need from Charan Singh in a month in which I would plan to visit him as frequently as possible to record his recollections on tape and to consult his files and personal papers. My interviews in Meerut district also will contain questions about Charan Singh. I will also interview his political associates in Lucknow and Delhi. I anticipate that the results of my research will consist of chapters and articles some of which will be interwoven with my project to be carried out in 1982-83. My work on Meerut will be [redacted] part of a book. The research on Charan Singh will be written up in the form of a series of articles that will focus on particular aspects of his career and thought in the context of the politics and economic issues of his time.

FOOTNOTES

-
1. Brass [1981]
 2. Morris-Jones [1971: Ch.ii].
 3. Singh [1964]
 4. Ibid., p. 103.
 5. Ibid., p. 104.
 6. See, e.g., BKD [1971] and Lok Dal [1979]